

(Washington, DC)- This morning the House Committee on Financial Services passed by a unanimous voice vote the Safe Housing Identity Exemption for the Lives of Domestic Violence Victims (SHIELD) Act, a bill introduced by Congresswoman Gwen Moore (D-WI) earlier this year. The bill, co-sponsored by Ranking Committee Member Barney Frank (D-MA) and Congresswoman Katherine Harris (R-FL), would ensure that victims of domestic violence who have fled their abuser could not then be tracked and found through the Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) new Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). The SHIELD Act will now be forwarded on with a favorable recommendation from the Financial Services Committee for consideration by the full U.S. House of Representatives.

"Today my colleagues on the Financial Services Committee unanimously agreed to support a simple solution to protect a vulnerable population, and for that I am grateful. This bill will make certain that the anonymity of victims of domestic violence remains secure," Congresswoman Moore said. "Unless the current HUD rules are amended, the identities and locations of hundreds of thousands could be exposed to those who wish to hurt or even kill them."

Currently, all domestic violence shelters, transitional housing programs, homeless shelters, and emergency shelters receiving funds from the HUD McKinney-Vento Act are required to submit the names and other personal information of all who use the facility into the HMIS tracking database. Employees and contractors of federal, state, and local agencies-some of whom may be abusers-have access to the HMIS database. A study from Carnegie Mellon University has found that 53 percent of the U.S. population is likely to be uniquely identified by only place, gender, and date of birth.

The SHIELD Act would exempt shelters from having to submit personal information-such as first and last name, Social Security number, date of birth, ethnicity and race-about each person who seeks safety and shelter at their facility. Instead of offering such specific information, the SHIELD Act recommends using non-personal identifying information for data collection. This would still allow HUD to perform unduplicated counts and statistical analysis of those benefiting from its services in order to measure the effectiveness of McKinney-Vento Act programs.

Thirty-seven states have confidentiality laws that conflict with the requirement that shelters contribute information about those who use their services to the HMIS database, including Wisconsin. HUD initially considered exempting domestic violence victims in 2003, then reversed its position and removed the domestic violence exemption from the final HMIS standards released in 2004.

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